

# View From the Chalkboard



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## One Team: Classroom Teachers and Specialists

A few months back, an interesting article appeared here on the topic of teacher empowerment. It was a good read in many ways. Its basic point was that too often, specialists fail to fully appreciate the depth of experience and range of knowledge their fellow classroom teachers have to offer. Specialists sometimes make assumptions that can undervalue the training and experience of the classroom teacher, and conversely, the classroom teacher may not take full advantage of the knowledge and know-how the specialist can deliver. These two shortcomings happen, but in my experience, both misconceptions are short-lived in today's classrooms.

I've been a classroom teacher and reading specialist for close to 30 years in school districts with over 80,000 teachers (New York City) and ones with under 25,000 (Arlington, Virginia), and what I see is ever increasing teamwork among today's teaching professionals. Schools like Campbell Elementary, where I teach, are a place where classroom teachers and specialists join forces and respect one another every day. Classroom teachers and specialists coplan, costrategize, and even coteach to empower all students to learn.

The days are long gone when specialists dictate to classroom teachers how reading must be taught. Frankly, there never really was a one-size-fits-all remedy for the struggling reader. That's because an experienced classroom teacher knows that there are many stumbling blocks—not just one—to becoming a successful reader. The experienced reading specialist is able to provide extra tailored lessons and small-group instruction. He or she is able to assess, diagnose, and pinpoint student reading weaknesses as well as strengths. In addition, the vast majority of reading specialists I have worked with over the years are trained to transfer that information to other school professionals, such as psychologists, speech teachers, and special education teachers.

I have observed a few specialists who failed to ask experienced classroom teachers for their input or to fully collaborate as a team, but that is far from the norm in my experience. When it happens, it is transitory because both the classroom teacher and the specialists know that student empowerment, not teacher harmony, must be the end goal.

New teachers often face a barrage of must-take staff

development courses in their first few years. A

certain number of these mandatory courses fail to deliver new and valuable information. The growing trend to require teacher-provided course feedback—through formal evaluations and informal word-of-mouth—has permanently retired many ill-conceived courses. This self-correcting approach, although not perfect, is generally a win-win for teachers, trainers, and supervisors. When I started out, I too had a few dud courses. But I learned quickly that talking first with experienced teachers—both seasoned classroom teachers and veteran specialists—provided invaluable guidance in what to take and what to avoid.

Reading models come and go. Each has, so to speak, their day in the sun; I know, having tried many over the years, from Open Court to SRA. One that has sticking power and commanding results, in my view, is the readers' workshop model. It is student-centric, using read-alouds, minilessons, and shared reading—pivoting around what the student selects, not what the teacher chooses. The staff at


*"What I see is ever increasing teamwork among today's teaching professionals... to empower all students."*

## ONE TEAM: CLASSROOM TEACHERS AND SPECIALISTS

Campbell is thrilled that this is now our standard approach, and we credit our principal's foresight and unwavering encouragement to be innovative.

To have a successful teaching career, in my view, you need to have inspiration, be able to quickly adapt, and be open to new ideas that empower students to learn

now and to become lifelong learners in the years ahead. Having one team where classroom teachers and specialists value one another goes a long way.



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